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TEACHER-POETS ON CAMPUS

AT THE UNIVERSITY OF LOWELL THIS YEAR

by Paul F. Marion

Lowell, MA.- Though contemporary poetry has a limited audience, the creation of imaginative literature in any generation is the serious work of many individuals. This year the University of Lowell English department has several poets on its staff: William Aiken, Robert DeYoung, Helena Minton, and James Martin.

To William Aiken a poem is, "A verbal approximation of an emotional truth." He is not writing poems at the moment, but published widely in literary magazines such as New Renaissance and Hanging Loose in the late 60's and early 70's, and has written critical essays on important American poets, including Gary Snyder, Allen Ginsberg, and Robert Bly.

"Modern poetry speaks to some people," says Aiken, "but the audience may be limited because some people don't want to work at it."

A graduate of Harvard and Boston University, he was deeply involved with poetry when Michael Casey was a student of his. Casey, a native of Lowell and graduate of the University, continued writing poems, later served in Vietnam, and was named Yale Younger Poet in 1972 for his book, Obscenities, based on his war experiences. The book is dedicated to William Aiken.

Like Aiken, Robert DeYoung has been on the Lowell faculty for several years. A graduate of New York University, his poems have appeared in the New York Quarterly, Southern Humanities Review, and America among others. DeYoung has a keen interest in New England's diverse character. "It offers choices in its distinct differences between country and city, between mountains and the sea," he says. Noting that solitude is crucial to his writing, he mentions that New England offers that possibility, as well as crowds if one seeks them.

Asked about trends in contemporary literature, he commented that he is encouraged by the large number of public poetry readings,

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though he feels this may have peaked. On the subject of poets teaching poetry, he feels that, "Writers might take a different approach, stressing technical aspects and the effects of reading poems aloud, but on the whole their method is not very different."

Lately he is exploring new themes, writing about domestic life and driving cars, ordinary subjects in which he finds poetry. DeYoung's poems are included in the publication 10 x 3 by Northeastern University Press, and he is working on a new book.

A new member of Lowell's faculty is Helena Minton, a graduate of Beloit and the University of Massachusetts. Her poems have been published in Personal Effects by Alice James Books, a volume which includes poems by Robin Becker and Marilyn Zuckerman. She is also represented in the anthology, Flowering After Frost, a collection of New England poets.

Being a member of the University community has given her a sense of being involved in important work. She adds, however, that there is a need for balance in the teacher-writer. "There is a danger in each, because a person can spend all his energy teaching and have none left for writing, or one can commit all one's energy to writing, and that may not be healthy either because it might be too isolating."

She has worked in the Massachusetts Poets-In-The-Schools program and is also enthusiastic about working with young children. Her experiences with junior high students have been encouraging. Admiring their creative response, she says, "They can write poems in a room crowded with people!"

Currently working on some long poems, one of which deals with the Middlesex Canal, Minton said she has been exploring historical themes. This, she feels, is a natural progression for a writer. "After writing about more personal subjects, many poets move on to larger themes, history is one of them."

James Martin, a visiting lecturer at Lowell, has had two books published by the Copper Beech Press at Brown University: A Reunion

An ordained United Methodist minister, he will graduate from Boston University Graduate School in 1979 with a doctorate in Theology and English Literature. "My preparation in Theology influenced my poems much more than any English course I ever had," says Martin.

He feels that schools can put people in touch with Poetry, but not the power and beauty of major poetry. "Major poetry can't be talked about." He does believe though, that they can help you find a mentor who can help you find your voice.

On being a poet, James Martin says, "Being called a 'Poet' is a gift someone else gives to you."

The University of Lowell hopes to present a reading by the poets during the Spring semester. Though not known as a "writers' school," the local literary tradition is felt strongly when you stand on the lawn in front of Ball Engineering Center on the north campus, and look across the street, up at the third floor of a tenement where Jack Kerouac lived.

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(Editor's note: Paul F. Marion is a writer working on the Public Relations staff at the University of Lowell and a member of the Merrimack Valley Poets group.)